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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 004145

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SUBJECT: CONSERVATIVES MAINTAIN DISCIPLINE, WHILE U PARTY
HAS DISAPPOINTING SHOWING

REF: BOGOTA 4067

SUMMARY

1. (C) On October 26, the Conservative Party and the U Party held their internal elections to set their respective agendas leading up to the 2010 presidential elections. The Conservatives had a strong showing, with over 1.5 million votes cast for local delegates and National Committee members. The high turnout boosted the Conservatives' position within the Uribe coalition, encouraging their hope of playing a key role in determining the coalition's candidate in the 2010 presidential elections. In contrast, the weak participation in the U Party elections highlighted its lack of political base beyond its support for Uribe and a second reelection. End Summary.

Conservative's Big Turnout

2. (U) On October 26, three of Colombia's major political parties--the Polo Democratico Party, the U Party and Conservative Party--held their internal elections to select delegates to their respective party congresses (see refTel on Polo results). The Conservative Party had an impressive showing, with more than 1.5 million voters turning out to choose departmental leaders and an eleven-member National Party Committee. The high voter participation--a million more voters participated in the Conservatives' elections than in the opposition Polo's internal vote--showed the Party remains the most organized and unified force within the GOC's governing coalition, giving it leverage heading into the 2010 presidential and congressional elections.

3. (C) Close Uribe ally Senator Efraim Cepeda came in first followed by Senators Jose Salazar, Roberto Gerlein and Alirio Villamizar. Former Foreign Minister and FARC hostage Fernando Araujo won one of the eleven National Committee seats, but finished a disappointing fifth place. Salazar told us the eleven members of the Committee will likely select the Party's leadership (president and vice-president) at a November 29 meeting. Cepeda, the current Party president, will likely retain his seat given the successful internal elections, but a rotational presidency, with Salazar taking over in 2010, remains a possibility. Still, a well-known local columnist criticized the results, claiming the reelection of Gerlein and other party leaders "renowned for corruption and old-style dominance" bodes poorly for Colombia's democracy.

Future Prospects

¶4. (C) Cepeda said that with its strong showing, the Conservatives are focused on whether to pursue its own presidential candidate in 2010 or to look to continue in a coalition with the U Party and Cambio Radical. He stressed that either scenario would depend on whether Uribe decides to seek a third term. Cepeda told us that if Uribe goes for another term, the Conservatives will back him--but seek more national power in the GOC as the price of its support. Other coalition members complain that the Conservatives have received more than their share of cabinet and official positions in the current government.

¶5. (U) Representative Santiago Castro told us the Party is "looking to change the face of conservatism." The public perception of the Conservatives is that the Party remains "antiquated, old, and out of touch with reality." He said the strong turnout in the internal elections shows the contrary. Cepeda claimed the results prove the Conservatives have the most popular support within the Uribe coalition government, which would allow the party to play a decisive role in shaping the coalition's 2010 presidential and congressional candidates. Despite Cepeda's optimism, a well-known columnist slammed the Conservative leadership as more of the same corrupt, patronage-driven, old-style politicians that have plagued Colombia in the past.

¶6. (C) Cepeda said the if Uribe opts not to run, the Conservatives' status as the strongest coalition party should

make their candidate the presumptive coalition presidential contender in 2010. Cepeda and Salazar said the leading Conservative candidates would be Araujo, Ambassador to Spain and two-time candidate Noemi Sanin (who left the Party in 1998), former-Minister of Interior and Justice Carlos Holguin, and Minister of Agriculture Andres Felipe Arias. Salazar told us that internal party consultations to decide on candidates for 2010 are scheduled for the summer of 2009--likely after Uribe decides whether or not he will run. Few observers outside of the Party consider Holguin, Arias or any of the other potential Conservative party candidates to be serious contenders.

U Party - Stagnate

¶7. (C) The U Party also held internal elections on October 26, with a disappointing showing of 330,000 votes from fewer than half of Colombia's municipalities. The party drew most of its support from urban areas, especially Bogota. After the election, U Party President Senator Carlos Ferro--who replaced Senator Carlos Garcia who is in jail due to the para-political scandal--said the Party needs more grassroots support to remain a viable Party--especially if Uribe does not run again. The poor showing reinforces the perception that the Party is nothing more than a group of disparate, former Liberal regional political leaders with little in common besides Uribe. Ferro told us the Party's poor results reflect its failure to formulate an independent ideology or identity.

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